

ATTENDING TO GENIUS AMONG ILL AND DISABLED SUBJECTS

ATENDER AL GENIO ENTRE SUJETOS ENFERMOS Y DISCAPACITADOS

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Abstract: In this article, I develop an account of genius inspired by Kristeva's writings on feminine genius in order to argue that certain ill and disabled people should be considered geniuses in the face of social conditions and medical practices that too often marginalize, restrict, and silence them. In contrast to Kristeva's notion of feminine genius, which relies on an Oedipal developmental story, I argue that we should understand genius as (1) the intimate revolt of (2) a singular subject who (3) occupies a marginalized social position and who, through their revolt, (4) creates a work. Conceiving of genius in this way, I contend, opens up the possibility of recognizing Kristevan genius from marginalized positions other than that of women while remaining true to Kristeva's account of the intimate. Having developed this account, I offer an example by suggesting that Susan Wendell is one such genius. Finally, I move on to argue that, by taking Kristeva's theory of the semiotic seriously, we may discover genius among those with "severe cognitive disabilities," and discuss Eva Kittay's daughter, Sessa, as an example. My hope is that this concept may help us be attentive to the singular accomplishments of those who face exclusion and silencing as a result of illness or disability.

Keywords: Kristeva; Genius; Semiotic; Illness; Disability.

Resumen: En este artículo desarrollo un relato sobre el genio, inspirado en los escritos de Kristeva acerca del genio femenino, para argumentar que ciertas personas enfermas y discapacitadas deberían ser consideradas genios frente a las condiciones sociales y las prácticas médicas que con demasiada frecuencia las marginan, restringen y silencian. En contraste con la noción de genio femenino de Kristeva, que se basa en una historia de desarrollo edípico, sostengo que deberíamos entender el genio como (1) la revuelta íntima de (2) un sujeto singular que (3) ocupa una posición social marginada y que, a través de su revuelta, (4) crea una obra. Concebir el genio de este modo, afirmo, abre la posibilidad de reconocer el genio kristeviano desde posiciones marginadas distintas a la de las mujeres, sin dejar de ser fiel al relato de Kristeva sobre lo íntimo. Una vez desarrollado este relato, sugiero, a modo de ejemplo, que Susan Wendell es uno de esos genios. Por último, paso a argumentar que, si nos tomamos en serio la teoría de la semiótica de Kristeva, podemos descubrir genios entre las personas con “discapacidades cognitivas graves”, y pongo como ejemplo a Sessa, la hija de Eva Kittay. Espero que este concepto nos ayude a prestar atención a los logros singulares de quienes se enfrentan a la exclusión y el silenciamiento como consecuencia de una enfermedad o discapacidad.

Palabras clave: Kristeva; genio; semiótica; enfermedad; discapacidad.

Scholars such as Melinda Hall (2017) and Eivind Engebretsen (2020) have found in Julia Kristeva’s work a promising account of listening to patients based on her concepts of “intimate revolt”, vulnerability, and singularity. Whereas the majority of discussions in the fields of medical ethics and evidence-based medicine interpret patients within certain pre-determined categories, placing them within diagnostic types or forcing their ethical considerations within existing principles (like Beauchamp and Childress’s autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice; 2001), Kristeva encourages listening to patients’ unique experiences and struggles, allowing them the time and space to reflect and propose their own interpretations. Indeed, both Kristeva and Hall suggest that such a model of listening can have profound social effects. Kristeva hopes, for example, that a social change could occur in which non-disabled people would become open to our shared yet unique vulnerabilities such that true interaction between disabled and non-disabled people would become more common. She writes, “New worlds then open to our listening, difficult or enchained, neither normal nor disabled, [...] worlds finally returned to their plurality” (*Hatred and Forgiveness* 45). Taking up this model of pa-

tient interpretation, Hall argues, “This space for self-questioning, new understandings of illness and disability, and new self-understandings can [...] be part of a social and political revolt that challenges ableist formulations” (122).

While Kristeva’s contributions to the medical humanities offer invaluable insights into how interactions with ill and disabled people could be improved, an account of how these interactions might lead to broader social changes is left implicit. Perhaps a sort of feedback loop could arise in which some medical professionals have successes with “patient listening,” as Hall calls it, and this would inspire others to adopt the same methods. Or perhaps large-scale change would require an active campaign of advocating this form of patient listening in trainings or medical schools. In this essay, my aim is to articulate a third, complementary possibility. I argue that Kristeva’s concept of “genius” reveals one way in which this patient interpretation of a singular subject can lead to broader, social changes. This is because the genius, for Kristeva, exhibits “singular initiative”, “that intimate, infinitesimal, but ultimate force on which the deconstruction of any ‘condition’ depends” (*Colette* 407). If Kristeva is right that individuals must forge paths of freedom within restrictive social contexts, and that geniuses offer up their extraordinary yet communicable lives and works in ways that challenge oppressive¹ conditions from within, then this model may offer resources for understanding what is revolutionary in the lives of certain ill and disabled persons.²

To make this argument, I will proceed in three sections. First, I will give an overview of Kristeva’s concept of “intimate revolt” and explain how this is exemplified in the model of patient interpretation proposed by Kristeva and developed by Hall. Second, I will outline what Kristeva means by “genius” and argue that “feminine genius” would be better understood as a form of intimate revolt from the social (in this case, gendered) margins, rather than as a result of the Oedipal psychosexual development of women that Kristeva relies upon to unify her feminine geniuses. Finally, I suggest that understanding genius in this way frees up her account to apply to the singular achievements of other persons living in oppressive conditions, specifically ill and disabled geniuses.

1 In developing this concept of genius, Kristeva is responding to Simone de Beauvoir, especially *The Second Sex*, so she tends to use terms like “condition” and “situation” to name the broader social conditions that situate, restrict, or shape the lives of women (Kristeva, *Colette* 406-7). Similarly, in writing about disability Kristeva explains the use of the term “people in a situation of handicap” by disability advocates in France: “terminology that, far from being politically correct, has the advantage of indicating that the handicap is the result of limitation *and* a social response, in other words, a ‘situation’ created for the disabled person by society’s reception of them” (*Hatred and Forgiveness* 37). Following Kristeva, I will use these terms, as well as “marginalization” and “exclusion,” fairly interchangeable. However, I deviate from Kristeva in also using the term “oppression” throughout, both because it is more common and familiar in contemporary Anglophone philosophy and to call to the reader’s mind developments in thinking of oppression as a form of injustice that affects individuals as members of social groups. See, for example, the work of Marilyn Frye (1983), Iris Marion Young (2011 [1990]), and Ann Cudd (2006).

2 While I will focus on the lives of singular ill and disabled subjects in this paper, I believe the model could be extended to give an account of lives affected by myriad oppressive social conditions.

1. Intimate Revolt and Patient Listening

To develop her own account of revolt in *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*, Kristeva begins by looking at the etymology of the word revolt [*révolte*] (1-4). She provides a history of the word's meanings through time, finding in this history a *turning* and *returning* that will influence her own understanding of revolt. Kristeva outlines three figures of revolt, but for my purposes in the paper, I will focus on the second figure, "revolt as repetition, working-through, working-out" (16).

For Freud, working-through follows the interpretation of a psychic resistance where this interpretation does not suffice to overcome that resistance. This is because the interpretation may be convincing at the level of conscious understanding, but there remain affective investments which must be displaced. Working-through, then, is achieved by recalling something from one's unconscious, from one's past, which is resisted. Thus, it is a return. Moreover, this resistance is the result of the imposition of the symbolic which leads to the formation of the conscious/unconscious heterogeneity. Insofar as that which is recalled from the unconscious is blocked or resisted from conscious awareness (by the superego or ego ideal), its recollection is a transgression or displacement of this prohibition. We can also see this in the case of writing. For Kristeva, writing can allow that which has been denied meaning or access to the symbolic to be shared as meaningful. Through certain forms of literature, especially poetic language, drives which remain unarticulated and thus meaningless can become shared and meaningful. Again, this is a return to the unconscious, and one which displaces the boundary between meaninglessness and meaningfulness, sense and non-sense.

Kristeva later expands upon this understanding of revolt, naming it "intimate revolt." Intimate revolt captures two important features of the working-through discussed above. First, "intimate", for Kristeva, names "the heterogeneous continuity between body-soul-mind", the heterogeneity of the conscious and unconscious (Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt* 51). Second, because our identities and languages are constituted with and through others, intimate revolt is rarely, if ever, private or solitary. Rather, intimate revolt requires the forgiveness of others. Forgiveness (*pardón*) is transference, the affective link to another that allows one to interpret and reinterpret one's experiences—that is, to give articulation to what was unconscious—through the interpretations and silences offered as a gift (*don*) by another. We could also understand this process in terms of Kristeva's theory of language which distinguishes the affective, bodily aspect of language she calls "semiotic" from the shared, formalized aspect of language she calls "symbolic", while insisting that the two are in constant interaction as we make meaning as subjects

in process.³ Through the sharing that is intimate revolt, the subject can exchange preverbal meanings and attempts at interpretation with another subject to give conscious, symbolic articulation to the semiotic. So, in sum, forgiveness is the forging of a preverbal (semiotic, drive-based, affective) link with another which allows the unconscious to be given conscious meaning. This is a form of revolt because it is a return to the unconscious, the return of a lost past, which displaces or modifies a conscious or symbolic prohibition. By bringing something unconscious into conscious awareness, one's consciousness is itself transformed⁴; or, by bringing something semiotic into symbolic language, the symbolic is itself destabilized or, however modestly, deconstructed.⁵ These are not large-scale, structural, or culture-wide revolts. But where is a contemporary revolt to begin, Kristeva asks, if not at this level of the intimate?

Furthermore, intimate revolt, in Kristeva's sense, is also a rebirth or renewal because subjects are transformed in the process of revolt. Intimate revolt is "a psychical restructuring" (8). What was unconscious has become conscious; what was inexpressible has been given meaning; a lost past has been reinterpreted. Indeed, in reinterpreting this past, a new present (and therefore future) become possible. As Kristeva writes, "What makes sense today is not the future (as communism and providential religions claimed) but revolt: that is, the questioning and displacement of the past. The future, if it exists, depends on it" (5). Thus, intimate revolt is a source of *continuous* renewal or "infinite re-creation" of the subject (6). There will always be a past to return to, an affect or drive to bring into meaning, an unstable boundary between the unconscious and conscious to be refigured. In this way the subject is capable of continual rebirths.

We can thus see why intimate revolt offers an account of listening to patients that differs from others. Through intimate revolt, an interpretation is not imposed on the subject. Instead, the subject is offered the opportunity to make meaning, to test out their own interpretations, to wrestle with bringing their experiences to consciousness in a way that can be communicated to others. In the clinical context, this means that the healthcare professional and the patient would share attempts at meaning making,

3 Throughout, this is the sense in which I use the term "subject." When discussing ill and disabled individuals in medical encounters, then, the reader should understand the subject to be one who is wrestling with meaning-making, not as a patient of mere observation as in the phrase "human subjects research."

4 Explaining why she prefers the term "revolt" over recollection, Kristeva writes, "Precisely so as not to give the impression that the analytical experience and the literary experience consist of [...] simple repetition. [...] A modification, a displacement of the past, occurs and, by returning to painful places, [...] there is a reformulation of the psychological map" (*The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* 50).

5 About this idea, Kristeva writes, "It is a matter of pushing the need for the universal *and* the need for singularity to the limit in each individual. [...] 'There is meaning': this will be my universal. And 'I' use the words of the tribe to inscribe my singularity. [...] 'I' will express my specificity by distorting the nevertheless necessary clichés of the codes of communication and by constantly deconstructing ideas/concepts/ideologies/philosophies that 'I' have inherited" (*The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* 19).

trying to articulate what an experience is like or why a decision should be made, rather than reducing the patient to a diagnostic type or the patient's options to pre-determined ethical principles or prognostic probabilities. Thus, intimate revolt does not reduce the singular subject to a type. A diagnosis may tell us about certain common experiential contours of a range of patients, but it cannot tell us what it is like or what it means to be *this* patient. And intimate revolt is key to the work of "reestablishing ties" that Kristeva says is important in the treatment of ill and disabled subjects, including "reestablishing the narcissistic image, the erotic tie, restoring language" (*Hatred and Forgiveness* 154). The onset of an illness or disability presents a subject with a challenge. One's life narrative, one's self-concept, one's relationships, and one's words had been suited to a set of experiences, a life trajectory, that is interrupted by this new experience. Absent intimate revolt, then, a patient may well find that their life now is simply a lack, a pause, or even the death of their former life. They may find that their relationships are unsuited to their new realities. They may find that their words no longer capture their experiences. But intimate revolt offers another possibility. Through intimate revolt, one's self-understanding and one's narrative can be questioned and revised such that they meaningfully include the experience of illness or disability; relationships can be re-worked in the give-and-take of patiently listening and speaking to one another; and new words or interpretations can be tested, rejected, and affirmed until the meaning of one's experiences can be communicated.

2. Feminine Genius

The previous section explained why intimate revolt is an important resource for healthy and productive interactions with ill and disabled persons. In this section, I offer an interpretation of feminine genius as a form of intimate revolt from within oppressive social conditions. Doing so will allow me to expand upon Kristeva's concept of genius in the third section, applying it to subjects who are confronted with other oppressive conditions, specifically to the lives of certain ill or disabled persons.

Kristeva's *Female Genius Trilogy* is a collection of three intellectual biographies about Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, and Collette, bookended by reflections on what she calls "feminine genius." Genius, she writes, is "the most fertile version of singularity at a given historical moment" (*Collette* 404). Uncovering the singularity of each subject is one of the main concerns that runs throughout Kristeva's corpus. Specifically, she rejects feminisms that cannot acknowledge the singular differences between each woman, and more recently, she has insisted upon the singularity of all disabled subjects.

She takes her inspiration to be Duns Scotus' notion of *haecceity*, or "thisness". Reality is to be found not in universals, for Scotus, "but in 'a this one,' *this man here, this woman there*; [...] the demonstrative indexing an unnamable singularity" (Kristeva, "A Tragedy and a Dream" 224; emphasis in the original). We can see why Kristeva is interested in Scotus, for she too seeks to reveal the singularity of each subject beneath the categories through which we understand them (man, woman, disabled, and so on). Her solution is that there are structural similarities shared by all subjects, and yet there are specific histories or particular developmental paths followed by each individual. Each individual is formed through the relationships they have navigated, first with care-givers and then gradually with others. And yet, each subject is composed of a conscious and an unconscious and articulates meaning through the interaction of semiotic drives and symbolic, shared language. Thus, our individuating, but never solitary, histories are capable of being shared because of the shared structuring of all subjects in relation to the symbolic and semiotic modalities of language. Put another way, the shared structure of each subject is what makes their singularity communicable.

Genius, then, is a form of singularity that "pushes variation to the limit, to the point of a maximum singularity, which can nevertheless still be shared" (Kristeva, *Colette* 426). That is, the genius creates such a unique life that normal variations are challenged or displaced. Moreover, a genius is one whose work is connected to their life to such an extent that one cannot be discussed without the other (Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt* xi). This means that the effects of a genius's works depend upon our response. The work must create an excess which invites our response, but it remains up to us to discuss the person's biography, or rather, to give the person a biography in terms of their work. This biography, by its very nature, will be deflationary; no narrative can capture the entirety of the life or the profundity of its excess. Yet we feel compelled to write or tell these stories. And in doing so, we realize that "they are geniuses for us", that is, they are not objectively extraordinary, but in relation to their biographers (xii). Moreover, they make us realize that we too are potential geniuses, as we too have stories to be told and are capable of making creations to wonder at.⁶

We may then ask with Kristeva, "And what role do women play in all this?" (xii). In other words, why think there is a *feminine* genius? Kristeva claims to find three "resonance[s]" [*résonances*] (xx) between the three women she discusses in the trilogy.

6 I take this passage as evidence of this claim: "Like the ancient Greek heroes, my geniuses displayed qualities that, while no doubt exceptional, can be found in most of us. [...] What distinguishes these geniuses from us is simply that they have left us to judge a body of work rooted in the biography of their experience" (Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt* x).

The first trait is a singularity founded in relationships. Arendt's "who" is revealed only in a web of relationships, Klein's ego always has an object, and in Colette's writing, the ego is fulfilled in the plurality of its relationships.⁷ The feminine genius, then, is reconciled with, and does not seek to deny, the constitutive nature of relationships with others for her own existence, but nor does she deny the singularity of the individual subject who is allowed to flourish precisely because of and through her relations with others.

Second, for feminine geniuses, thought is immanent to life. Thus, Arendt is adamant that life as *bios*, as a life that is given sense, must be elevated above bare *zoë*, or biological life. It is only thought in its myriad manifestations, not simply thought as calculation, that can save us from totalitarianism in her view. Similarly, Kristeva reads Klein to be concerned with the emergence and fostering of the capacity of thought. Her research, aimed at avoiding or curing infantile psychosis, was meant not to normalize, but to defend thought and the conditions that make it possible. Colette, on Kristeva's reading, creates and recreates lives through her writing which makes "thought become flesh" (Kristeva, *Colette* 422). Thinking is not an abstract activity, for Colette, but that which engenders new forms of sensuous writing, creating new lives. For each of these geniuses, then, life is the life of the mind, and thought is living-thought.

Finally, the feminine genius emphasizes cyclical temporality, re-creation, or rebirth. Arendt finds in natality the source of freedom, as each birth is a "new beginning", the creation of a new world (423). Klein was herself reborn, Kristeva tells us, as a result of her own analysis which led her to become an analyst. Moreover, in her work with children, Klein emphasized the importance of the analyst entering the world of the child by using counter-transference, becoming a child again (424). Colette, too, sees in writing an opportunity for re-creation and rebirth.

What unites these qualities as feminine? What gives rise to the fact that these three women, and perhaps many women geniuses, share these qualities? For Kristeva, the answer lies in her account of female psychosexual development according to which women have a more pronounced psychic bisexuality from which the three above-mentioned traits result (408-419). For reasons that have been widely discussed in critiques of Oedipal psychoanalysis,⁸ I worry that her account is unnecessarily heteronormative.

7 I phrase this ambiguously because Kristeva finds these traits in the works *and* lives of these three geniuses. This reveals the connection between the genius's life and works. So, for example, Arendt's own "who" is revealed in a web of relationships *and* Arendt's theoretical claim about the "who" is that it emerges only in a web of relationships.

8 There are many criticisms of Oedipal accounts of psychosexual development, but the following have been among the most influential for my own thinking: Mary Beth Mader's discussion of psychoanalytic accounts of bisexuality in *Sleights of Reason*, especially the third chapter; Luce Irigaray's discussion of the problems of psychoanalytic theory for feminism in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, especially the chapter titled "Psychoanalytic Theory:

Instead, I believe that feminine genius is better understood as a form of intimate revolt from within a restrictive “condition” or “situation.”

To help defend this interpretation, I would like to note that Kristeva herself has made several connections between revolt and exclusion or marginalization.⁹ First, Kristeva writes:

[...] the *normalizing* order is far from perfect and fails to support the *excluded*: jobless youth, the poor in the projects, the homeless, the unemployed, and foreigners, among many others. When the *excluded* have no culture of revolt and must content themselves with regressive ideologies, with shows and entertainments that far from satisfy the demand of pleasure, they become rioters (*The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt 7*, emphasis added).

I take her to be pointing out that those who are in some way excluded by a normalizing order will be more likely to experience this order as problematic and contingent (though not necessarily consciously). Insofar as they are not given the resources necessary for revolt, and are therefore hindered in questioning and creating meaning, other defensive responses will likely follow. These could be “regressive ideologies” which give such persons a sense of meaning without providing resources for self-criticism, immersion in superficial pleasures which do not provide meaning or the opportunity for questioning, or rioting against an order which fails to give meaning to excluded lives, a reaction which does not propose counter-meanings of its own. Thus, while the excluded or marginalized may be in a privileged position to expose or resist the normalizing order, without the resources necessary for revolt there is a danger of harmful reactionary responses.

Second, on Kristeva’s reading of *Totem and Taboo*, early social links were founded on the murder of a father by his sons. The sons’ sense of guilt for this murder created a bond between them, and caused the father’s power of force to be transformed into a symbolic, religious, ancestral power. Sacrifice then became necessary as a reminder of this original guilt and emergence of the social. But sometimes the benefits of this social contract “threaten to disappear” as a result of “unemployment, *exclusion*, lack of money, failure in work, dissatisfaction of every kind” (14, emphasis added). When this occurs, the subject no longer feels integrated in the social and thus must find new forms

Another Look”; and Birgit Schippers’s *Julia Kristeva and Feminist Thought*, especially her insight that, for Kristeva, women can be mothers and become maternal geniuses, men can share in the experience of maternity if they “tap into their feminine dispositions”, but “lesbian mothering, and with it, access to maternal genius [for lesbians]” is denied (124). For a defense of Kristeva’s oeuvre against accusations of homophobia, see Sylvie Gambaudo’s “Julia Kristeva, ‘Woman’s Primary Homosexuality’ and Homophobia.”

⁹ Schippers makes a similar claim. She writes that “it would be interesting to ask why revolt emerges at the margins; in other words, whether marginality constitutes a privileged position in the generation of change” (65). By looking closely at the four following passages, I hope to show that there is an affirmative answer in Kristeva’s work.

of revolt. This explains new forms of ritual and sacrifice in which “an imaginary power” emerges in order to “satisfy the need to confront an authority in [one’s] imagination” (14). These imaginary confrontations, in the form of rituals or artistic works, allow for the transgression of authority without physical violence. Again, it is in the experience of being excluded or marginalized that new forms of revolt arise. What is important, for Kristeva, is that the confrontation with authority be sublimated into works, or become the source of new meaning, rather than resulting in aggression.

Third, consider Kristeva’s discussion of psychoanalysis as a setting for the displacement of trauma. She writes, “A patient goes to an analyst in order to remember his past, his traumas, his feeling of *exclusion*. [...] ‘I’ am unable to express myself, ‘I’ am inhibited, ‘I’ am depressed, ‘I’ am *marginalized* because ‘I’ have this or that sexuality” (29, emphases added). Marginalization, or social exclusion, is a particularly important cause of psychic suffering. Through psychoanalytic transference, displacements are effected which allow the possibility of working-through. “In the best cases”, Kristeva tells us, “analysis is an invitation to become the narrator, the novelist, of one’s own story” (29). This is because in narrating (and re-narrating) one’s life, one revolts, bringing meaning to drives, bringing a lost past to consciousness. Insofar as the marginalized are more likely to experience this form of psychic suffering, or are more likely to require such displacements and transgressions to make meaning, they are in a privileged site for revolt.¹⁰ Unlike subjects who fit within the normalizing order, and are therefore readily provided with symbolic meanings suited to their lives, the subject excluded by normalizing power will be more likely to need to create new meanings through revolt.¹¹

This brings us to the trilogy, in which Kristeva discusses her three feminine geniuses in terms of women’s “condition”. Here she writes, adapting a question asked by Simone de Beauvoir, “*How, through the female condition, can a woman’s being be fulfilled, that is, her individual opportunity in terms of freedom [...]?*” (*Colette* 407; emphasis in the original). Her answer is, as we have seen, the “singular initiative” of feminine geniuses, that “ultimate force on which the deconstruction of any ‘condition’ depends” (407). Writing of Arendt, Klein, and Colette, Kristeva says they “did not wait for the ‘female condition’ to evolve in order to realize their freedom: is not ‘genius’ precisely that breach through and beyond the ‘situation’?” (407). In other words, Kristeva denies that an oppressive condition itself must be changed for women to achieve freedom. Rather,

10 S. K. Keltner offers a similar explanation (127-130).

11 To be sure, there is *no* subject for whom given norms or symbolic meanings can entirely suffice for her psychic life. Still, it is clear that subjects can be more or less excluded, more or less marginalized by a normalizing, symbolic order.

she sees in feminine geniuses this “singular initiative”, their engagement in intimate revolts which challenge the oppressive status quo.

In sum, those excluded by a normalizing order, by oppressive social conditions, are in a better position to question these conditions through intimate revolt. Those excluded subjects who successfully revolt, and who in doing so create a body of work, are geniuses whose singular initiative contributes, however modestly, to the deconstruction of the oppressive conditions themselves. It is not surprising, then, that the three shared traits of Kristeva’s feminine geniuses are closely tied to her understanding of intimate revolt. The first of the traits is the fostering of singularity always *within* relationships. Recall that for Kristeva, intimate revolt is always a sharing, enabled by another through transference. The second of the traits is “the concern to safeguard the life of thought”. The thought Kristeva has in mind here is not abstract, calculative thought, but thinking tied to one’s life and conditions, to one’s past and relationships. This is precisely what Kristeva calls intimate revolt: the return and questioning of a lost past, giving words to the drives. It is a thinking that involves the heterogeneity of the subject and affective links with others, not thinking that is dominated by the purely conscious, the abstract, the symbolic. Finally, “the insistence on the time of flowering and rebirth” (424) is closely tied to Kristeva’s understanding of revolt. Recall that each revolt is a rebirth or renewal of the subject. This is because in revolt, the subject’s psyche is restructured, and this is possible because of the forgiveness of the other. Thus, the subject in revolt is reborn into a social link which allows for the possibility of revolt but which link is also itself modified through revolt. Furthermore, the temporal character of this revolt is one of rebirth because revolt accomplishes a return to a lost past, the timelessness¹² of the unconscious, in order to re-emerge in conscious, symbolic time.

3. Genius among Ill and Disabled Subjects

In freeing feminine genius of its Oedipal justification, my hope is to inspire the development of alternative forms of genius found in lives constrained by oppressive conditions. Recall that genius, for Kristeva, is a form of singularity that results in a work that cannot be disconnected from the life of that singular subject. I have argued that what unites feminine geniuses is that their singularity challenges particular oppressive social conditions. Thus, if similarly oppressive conditions exist for ill persons and disabled persons, we may identify genius in the works of singular, disabled or ill subjects.

12 In *Intimate Revolt*, Kristeva has an extended discussion of the *Zeitlos*, or timeless, character of the unconscious. In order to simplify Kristeva’s account without unnecessary digressions, I have largely avoided a proper examination of this topic. Keltner (2011) devotes the fourth chapter of her book on Kristeva to this topic.

There is good evidence to believe that many disabled people live in oppressive conditions. Indeed, in her writings on disability, Kristeva mentions at least three ways in which disabled people are excluded. First, they are excluded from social institutions. She writes, for example, “There are still tens of thousands of children who are not in school because of their disability: they could be, with support” (*Hatred and Forgiveness* 37). Second, they are excluded from political consideration and material support or “compensation” by a culture of charity, which she calls “the compassionate *margins*, where we tend to isolate him [the disabled individual], with love” (36, emphasis added). Third, they face an exclusion “*that is not like others*” (44; emphasis in the original), an exclusion from meaningful personal interactions by those who don’t want to be reminded of their own vulnerability, those who experience “the horror of narcissistic injury” (43) when they encounter disabled persons.¹³ If we agree with Kristeva that disabled persons are often subject to these conditions of exclusion, who might challenge these conditions and, in doing so, create a body of work that cannot be separated from their life story?

I would like to consider two individuals as geniuses with regard to disability: Susan Wendell and Sessa Kittay. Susan Wendell wrote *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*, a philosophical yet personal work inspired by her own experiences. She was a professor in the Women’s Studies department of Simon Fraser University when she fell ill in 1985 with what was later diagnosed as chronic fatigue dysfunction syndrome (also known as myalgic encephalomyelitis outside of the United States), an event which changed the course of her life and her academic focus. As she writes in the book:

The more I learned about other people’s experiences of disability and reflected upon my own, the more connections I saw between feminist analyses of gender as socially constructed from biological differences between females and males, and my emerging understanding of disability as socially constructed from biological differences between the disabled and non-disabled. In addition, I was increasingly impressed by the knowledge people with disabilities have about living with bodily suffering and limitation and about how their cultures treat rejected aspects of bodily life. It was clear to me that this knowledge did not inform theorizing about the body by non-disabled feminists and that feminist theory of the body was consequently both incomplete and skewed toward healthy, non-disabled experience (5).

The result of this theorizing is a book which attempts to tackle a great variety of problems, from defining disability, to problems with the authority placed in medicine, to the

¹³ For more detailed discussions of Kristeva’s writings on disability, see Bunch (2017), Dohmen (2016), and Grue (2013).

complex relationship of disability and feminism. But *The Rejected Body* is not simply a work of theory. Its introduction frames the work in terms of her own experiences, and throughout the chapters, Wendell inserts personal experiences where relevant, sometimes to give examples, sometimes to show where a particular argument originated.

Consider, for instance, the chapter entitled “Feminism, Disability, and the Transcendence of the Body”. Here, she discusses her own experiences with chronic pain. She writes, “When I became ill, I felt taken over and betrayed by a profound bodily vulnerability. I was forced by my body to reconceptualize my relationship to it” (169). The experience of chronic pain leads Wendell, on her own account, to rework her relationship to her body. Specifically, Wendell describes her experience of learning, from others, to “mak[e] friends with” her pain (171). To do so is to accept pain, to observe it, rather than resisting it or wishing to get rid of it, in order to “reduce the suffering it actually causes” (171). Later, she refers to this as a process of relaxing “into” the pain, through which the “pain is transformed into something else—sometimes a mental image, sometimes a train of thought, sometimes a desire to do something, such as lying down or getting warmer, sometimes sleep” (172). The experience of pain is transformed into various other effects, the conscious and unconscious rejection of pain is transformed into a relationship of acceptance, her unarticulated experience of the pain is given words, first through an expression learned from others (“making friends with their pain”), then through a poetic turn of phrase of her own (“to relax ‘into it’”).

Indeed, we can see in Wendell’s book many concerns about medicine that Kristeva shares, especially in her chapter titled “The Cognitive and Social Authority of Medicine”. In granting so much epistemic and cultural authority to medicine, Wendell notes, we threaten to abandon those who medicine deems beyond cure, to impose interpretations, categories, and diagnoses on patients, and to miss out on opportunities to better understand illness and disability, especially from the perspectives of ill or disabled people. Wendell shares an anecdote of a woman being sent to a mental hospital because she described her pain as being like a crab inside of her, when in fact the pain turned out to be caused by an ulcer (134). Here we see not only a failure to listen to the patient, but a lost opportunity to alter our symbolic categories, to recognize “a crab inside of me” as an apt description of the feeling of an ulcer, a description that could have helped many other patients.

What I am pointing to is an experience of revolt that, along with other intimate revolts, results in the production of an innovative work in philosophy. Wendell returns to a lost past here, focusing conscious attention on unconscious responses to pain, the experience of the onset of her disability, and so on. This return is enabled by relationships

to others, some intellectual (e.g., learning the concept of making friends with pain), some intimate (e.g., experiencing transference in relationships with others which allow her to give meaning to her experiences). It effects a rebirth in which her conscious, unconscious, and bodily experiences are displaced. At the same time, senseless experiences are inscribed into the symbolic. Finally, the work—which began in the marginal experience of being a woman with a chronic illness, and in a theoretical space outside the norms of mainstream philosophy and even feminist philosophy—challenges philosophy, medicine, and feminism, among other fields, to reckon with what they have excluded. In this way, Susan Wendell is a disabled genius.

Whereas Wendell is diagnosed with a disabling chronic illness, the results of which were largely physical,¹⁴ Sessa Kittay is, according to her mother, severely cognitively disabled. This may appear a strange example to draw from. After all, she could not speak and had “no measurable I.Q.” at age twenty-seven (Kittay 151). If a return to the unconscious or semiotic is a necessary part of revolt, should we not conclude that she is incapable of such a revolt? If creating a body of work is a necessary component of genius, how could she be a genius? I am admittedly attempting to work out a very challenging case. I think that Sessa is a genius in Kristeva’s sense of the word, but if my readers are unconvinced, I hope that what I say here at least illuminates other cases of cognitively disabled subjects.

First, then, in what sense can Sessa be said to accomplish a return? Eva Kittay writes that “Sessa was almost twelve before she learned to kiss or hug” (151). Sessa’s behaviors do not easily fall within Kristeva’s linguistic categories of semiotic or symbolic. This means that if we are concerned to listen to the other, we must listen to both. Sessa’s eyes following a falling leaf, for example, communicates meaning without entering symbolic discourse; that is, it appears to be semiotic. Learning to hug, however, comes closer to a symbolic articulation, in that it is a socially sanctioned expression and has a generally established meaning. Learning to kiss or hug, then, would require Sessa to return to a semiotic affect or drive—characterized, say, by affection—and, through the transference of love of others, to articulate this affect in this symbolic gesture. If such returns occur less frequently in Sessa’s life than in others, this does not mean they are not in fact returns, nor does it mean they are returns of a lesser degree.

Second, this return is enabled by relations with others. It is all too easy to imagine a person with a severe cognitive disability being ignored, or having no person with whom

14 This distinction is less clear than we often acknowledge. One of the powerful aspects of Wendell’s own work is her discussion of the psychological effects of and responses to physical pain, including depression.

to share her affection, and thus never finding the means to articulate those affects in terms of symbolic gestures. Sesha, however, did have care-takers who were patient, loved her, and allowed her to love them back. That is, there were others in Sesha's life who "forgave" her in relationships of transference, who allowed her to articulate herself in symbolic gestures by sharing a semiotic link.

Third, learning such a symbolic gesture is also a rebirth. An affect that remained unarticulated is, through the hug, capable of being articulated according to some, even if minimal, conscious choice. This also renews the link between Sesha and others. Affection that might have been only assumed by her caretakers is then able to be directly communicated. Such a gesture may also allow Sesha to make new links with others who may have been less patient than her immediate caretakers.

The greatest challenge for this case is the requirement that the genius produces a body of work. Here I want to push Kristeva's own words to their limits. Recall that Kristeva says a genius is one who "force[s] us to discuss their story because it is so closely bound up with their creations, in the innovations that support the development of thought and beings, and in the onslaught of questions, discoveries, and pleasures that their creations have inspired" (*Hannah Arendt* xi). How could Sesha's hugs or expressions of joy or frustration be thought of as such a creation? One thing to consider is that Sesha's actions and expressions have encouraged the development of thinking for both her mother, who wrestles with her own philosophical commitments as a result of her daughter's love and joy, and her caretakers. Kittay writes, "That which we believed we valued, what we—I—thought was at the center of humanity, the capacity for thought, for reason, was not it, not it at all" (150). And Peggy, Sesha's caretaker, learns quickly to work with Sesha, "Not my way. Your way. Slowly" (157). Furthermore, Sesha's creations have doubtlessly inspired "questions, discoveries, and pleasures", from the questions of the family, friends, and caretakers who interact with her to the philosophical questioning she inspired in her mother and which her mother's work continues to inspire; from the discovery of how to nourish and love a person that defies myriad norms to her mother's philosophical innovations (concepts like the "doulia", "connection-based equality", and "reciprocity-in-connection"¹⁵); from the pleasures that her joy and hugs bring those who know her to the pleasures experienced by others as a result of reading her mother's moving writing.

One obvious criticism, here, would be to say that I am interested more in Eva Kittay's own works than I am in her daughter's creations, but I think Kristeva provides an explanation for this. She writes, "The way these works affect us depends ultimately on

15 These concepts are introduced in Chapter 2 of *Love's Labor*.

the historical disturbances they bring about and on the way they influence other people and their followers—in sum, their effect depends on the way *we* respond to them” (*Hannah Arendt* xi; emphasis in the original). In other words, a work itself is *always* dependent upon how it is received, taken up, and responded to by others. The accomplishments of all of Kristeva’s feminine geniuses, for example, were in part contingent upon their receptions. And Sesha’s creations have inspired not only a book and many essays by her mother, but myriad responses from others. What Sesha has created has certainly inspired more work than many other lives ever will.

Finally, Kristeva writes that geniuses,

make us look at ourselves in a way that is just as ingenious as the way they locate their extraordinary character between their own pleas and the unpredictable opinion of the human beings who respond to them and who ordain them. At heart, they are geniuses for us—and for eternity, so much so that we become geniuses ourselves (*Hannah Arendt* xii).

Earlier she says, “my geniuses displayed qualities that, while no doubt exceptional, can be found in most of us”, adding that genius is the result of “paradoxical occurrences, unique experiences, and remarkable excesses that manage to pierce through an increasingly automated world” (x). In sum, geniuses have qualities which are common yet exceptional, they help us find singularity in a normalizing world, and they inspire others to be geniuses through their own genius. When we read the description of Sesha’s joys, hugs, and laughter, it is clear that there is something exceptional in her life, and yet joys, hugs, and laughter are common to most human lives. Sesha’s life, and the work she inspires her mother to write, pierces through the automated world, challenges all-too-common conceptions of worth as “productivity”, “health”, or “independence”, and in doing so it inspires us to reconsider ourselves, our relationships, and our own worth. *Love’s Labor* is not just about Sesha or disability, even though Sesha’s life is surely one of its inspirations; it is an attempt to rework the foundations of ethical relationships and political obligations. In other words, Sesha is a genius.

One final point to consider is the extent to which Sesha’s genius is related to her marginalized social position. Unlike the revolts of Kristeva’s feminine geniuses or Wendell, Sesha’s revolts are not the result of a social condition. It is not a failure of symbolic resources, for example, which leads to Sesha articulating her affection in the form of a hug or kiss. And yet, the influence Sesha has had on other works and authors is clearly due to the marginalization of cognitively disabled persons in the medical professions, academic philosophy, and so on. It is the struggle to put into philosophical language what makes Sesha’s life meaningful that gives Kittay’s work such depth. Kittay’s criticisms of our public policies are powerful because of the failure of social institutions to

provide a place for Sesha and others with similar disabilities that is neither impersonally institutional nor isolated within the immediate family. Thus, part of what makes Sesha's life a life of genius is the fact that she and others are marginalized, even if that is not at the source of her own intimate revolt.

4. Conclusion

In this essay, I have attempted to synthesize two aspects of Kristeva's work: her concept of patient interpretation through intimate revolt and her concept of genius. All too often, ill and disabled people confront normalizing discourses and practices that idealize conditions of health and ability, while conceiving of an illness or disability as a lack or as merely one among a set of diagnoses. Patient interpretation allows disabled and ill individuals the time and space to propose their own meanings, to assert their own singularity within a society that marginalizes, excludes, silences, or oppresses them. Indeed, in opening this opportunity for intimate revolt, we may find that the singularity of some individuals shines through to such an extent that they challenge our language, our concepts, or our assumptions. In such cases, their genius does not wait for society to change, but instead urges social change. If we hope that patient listening holds the promise of social revolt, we might seek to spread patient listening in medical training programs or other settings. I believe, however, that any such efforts would be best supplemented by the works of those whose lives already articulate an alternative to mainstream norms and hermeneutical resources. In addition to campaigning to spread a Kristevan practice of listening to patients, we ought to also be attentive to the already-present genius of ill and disabled subjects.

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